The Promise of Home: Displacement and Belonging in Children’s Literature

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According to the United Nations, “since 2000, the total number of international migrants increased by almost 50%. In 2017, the number of international migrants reached an estimated 258 million persons.” The United States receives the most immigrants each year at its borders by far, and was built on the legacy of immigrants. According to the Pew Research Center, nearly 50 million people living in the US were born in other countries. In the summer of 2018, BBC World News reported that there was controversy over what to do with families who cross the border into the US illegally, resulting in family separations of almost 2,000 migrant children in over six weeks.

These statistics are astounding, reflecting an increase in immigration activity across the globe and, while astounding, it is important to remember statistics are proxies for human experience. In this issue of First Opinions—Second Reactions, we have sought to collect titles that reflect a variety of perspectives about belonging, displacement, and, ultimately, a sense of home.

Our collection begins with stories of displacement. Bita Zakeri and Leslie Rowland review the YA novel Refugee by Alan Gratz. Refugee is the story of three intersecting immigrant children’s stories from different times and places: a Jewish boy in Nazi Germany, a Cuban girl fleeing Castro’s rule, and a Syrian boy escaping the civil war. Zakeri compares the authenticity of these narratives to her own experience as a child refugee, and Rowland describes how she would connect these stories authentically to the middle school students in her classroom.

Next, Tania Mertzman Habeck and Cheryl White review the picture book Stepping Stones—A Refugee Family’s Journey by Margriet Ruurs and illustrated by Syrian artist Nisar Ali Badr. A strikingly visual book, it utilizes a child’s perspective to convey the experience of deciding one’s home, with its comforts and familiarity, is too dangerous.

The immigrant experience is not limited to that of the immigrants themselves, but that journey resonates through time as seen in Junot Diaz’s Islandborn, reviewed by Eun Hye Son and Helen Bentley. When her teacher asks her to describe where her family immigrated from, Lola must rely on the memories of her family and neighbors to illuminate the island upon which she was born and left shortly after.

The role of generational history in the immigration experience continues Ya-Huei Liu’s and Michelle Greene’s reviews of A Different Pond by Bao Phi. Grounded in the stories told by his father while on an early morning fishing trip of similar fishing trips in his native Vietnam, a young boy glimpses the challenges and emotional toll immigration has taken on his parents; despite these hardships, their life is joy and love is in their hearts.
Finally, Jodene Morrell and Tracy Terris review *Her Right Foot*, shifting, again, to help readers think about the possibilities America represents to the world and the responsibilities of citizens to live those values, even in the most difficult of times.

It was our hope, in bringing together these texts, to create opportunities for teachers to engage students in conversations about complex issues, such as home, belonging, immigration, and displacement. The children’s literature scholars in this issue have done lovely work of carefully reading these titles and exploring their features; the educators in this issue build upon this work to make connections to the students in their classrooms and libraries. We hope you find deeper understanding of each of these titles and inspiration for how you might leverage these titles to engage students in rich conversation about the human need to know a home, the experience of losing a home, and to be welcomed to a new one.

**Works Cited**

